

ARPC Rachel and Joseph: The birth of a prince Acts Ch 7:9ff 12th December 2021

The story of Joseph has been popularised by Andrew Lloyd Weber's musical "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour dream coat". There is a wealth of biblical narrative in the later chapters of Genesis, it is an amazing story, but the challenge is to know how to speak of Rachel and Joseph as an Advent sermon.

The famous preacher Charles Spurgeon once said to a young and aspiring preacher. *"Don't you know young man, that from every town and every village and every hamlet in England, wherever it may be, there is a road to London? So, from every text in scripture there is a road to the great metropolis, Christ. And my dear brother, your business is, when you get to a text, to say, what is the road to Christ?...I have never found a text that had not got a road to Christ in it, and if I ever do find one....I will go over hedge and ditch but I would get at my Master, for the sermon cannot do any good unless there is a savour of Christ in it."*

So, there is the challenge and as Rev Spurgeon says there is no wimping out. So today we are going to remind ourselves of the story of the birth of Joseph, a miracle birth, and then we are going to see what the NT tells us is important in the life of Joseph by looking at three texts Acts Ch 7, Stephen's last speech, Hebrews Ch 11 in the list of those of faith and the reference to his inclusion in the people of God in Rev 7 as we examine his connection to Christ Jesus.

The birth and life of Joseph (Genesis Ch 25ff)

When Jacob saw Rachel for the first time it was love at first sight. He had fled his home in Canaan, deceived his brother Esau and father Isaac and was advised by his mother to get away and find a wife among his own people. So, after a long and emotionally fraught journey he approaches Haran, the area where his uncle Laban lives, and he meets Rachel a shepherdess with her sheep, and he is overcome with emotion and runs to kiss her and cries uncontrollably. He gets an invite back to the house and he is welcomed and begins to work for Laban as a shepherd. It turns out he is a good shepherd and Uncle Laban wants to employ him. Jacob sees a chance to gain Rachel in marriage so he agrees to work for seven years so she can be his wife. Maybe that sounds like a long time to us, but we are told in Genesis Ch 29 Firstly that Rachel was *"lovely in form and beautiful"*, that Jacob was *"in love with her"*, and that the seven years *"seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her."*

The story however doesn't develop along the lines of they lived happily ever after, because his uncle Laban was a deceitful man, who didn't want Jacob or Rachel to leave so he schemed to marry Jacob to Leah, her older sister. Laban told him it wasn't their custom to marry the younger sister first and if he worked for a further seven years he could marry Rachel, which he did and they were then married. The situation within the family becomes what could only be described as extremely messy, two wives one loved more than the other, two maids who also have children by Jacob and Rachel, deeply loved but not able to have a child as Leah has six boys and one girl (Dinah)! Bilhah, Leah's maid has two! and Zilpah, Rachel's maid has two, ten boys and one girl so Rachel's agony is protracted, possibly stretching to 20 years. Rachel has been severely tested by her childlessness and Leah's ability

to have children and she is described honestly in the bible as being jealous of Leah and in a moment of utter despair she says to Jacob, *"give me children, or I'll die!"* Genesis Ch 30:1

It shows the depth of Rachel's distress at her childlessness but God in his grace sees her situation and hears her prayer. We are told in Genesis Ch 30:22 *God remembered Rachel. He listened to her and opened her womb. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, "God has taken away my disgrace." She named him Joseph and said, "May the Lord add to me another son."*

Rachel did conceive again, and she had another son but sadly she died immediately after the birth. She named the boy Ben-Oni meaning son of my trouble, and Jacob renamed him Benjamin meaning Son of my right-hand." A family of twelve boys and 1 girl, the of the boys grieving a mother, and a father grieving the death of the true love of his life. That is the context of Joseph's early life.

Joseph in Acts Ch7:9-18

When Stephen recalls the life of Joseph in his speech to the Jewish leadership recorded in Acts Ch 7 these are the main points he draws out for us about him that will guide our reflection on Joseph.

God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles

Joseph was precious to Jacob, his father, the first-born child of his beloved Rachel, a reminder of her. He appears to be close to his father, some would say spoiled, he was given a special coat, and had an ability to dream (visions) which isolated him further from his brothers, a gift from God and an awareness of God. The brothers were a band of men who as the story unfolds were guilty of murder, rape, deceit and lies. Popular thought lays the blame at the door of poor parenting, favouritism on Jacob's part and arrogant selfishness on Joseph's part and there is probably some element of that, but Joseph has a relationship with God which his Father recognised, and his brothers hated. So, they scheme to kill him and in God's providence sell him into slavery in Egypt.

He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Joseph is sold into the home of Potiphar the captain of Pharaoh's guard. He shows real leadership skills with aptitude and is quickly given responsibility and freedom. He has continued to develop his gift of dreams and interpretation, but all is thrown into jeopardy when he is accused unfairly of rape by Potiphar's wife and is thrown into prison. In prison he also is granted a measure of responsibility because of his integrity and skills and while there he meets two sad characters who used to work for Pharaoh, his cupbearer and his baker who have had dreams. *"We both had dreams," they answered, but there is no-one to interpret them." Then Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams." Gen 40:8*

They do, the cupbearer's dream, three vines with budding grapes squeezed into Pharaoh's cup, means he will live, and the Baker's dream, three baskets of bread on his head that the birds eat, means he will die. In three days, that is what happened. The cupbearer who is close to Pharaoh promises to tell Pharaoh of Joseph, but he doesn't and a further two years

passes, until the night Pharaoh has a scary dream of seven fat cows and seven thin cows who eat them without effect and seven fat ears of corn that eat up seven withered ears of corn without effect. What does it mean? asked Pharaoh but no-one could answer, until the cupbearer remembered and told Pharaoh of a man in prison who told him his dream and was correct. Joseph is sent for and he says this to Pharaoh, *"I cannot do it but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires"* Gen. Ch 41:16. The seven years of plenty and seven years of famine for Egypt are explained and Pharaoh believes and offers him the job of overseeing all the plans that will need to be made to survive and he becomes the second in command and the most powerful man in Egypt.

So, he made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.

Stephen goes on in his summary to tell us that Jacob, his father, his brothers and their families are brought to Egypt (75 persons) who are saved from death because of the famine, and they prosper there. However, Jacob and Joseph both die in Egypt and the oppression of God's people begins, Acts 7:18 *"Then another King, who knew nothing about Joseph, became ruler of Egypt. He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our forefathers by forcing them to throw out their new-born babies so that they would die."* So begins the story of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt.

Joseph's faith and vision

It's a good story, it does make a great musical, but neither Jacob nor Joseph believed it was the end of the story. It is this that the writer of Hebrews notes when he includes Joseph in the pantheon of faith that is Hebrews Ch 11. *"By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones."*

Joseph was born to Jacob and Rachel, he had a deep faith in God and was gifted by God for the purpose of becoming a ruler in Egypt so that he could save his family and particularly his brother Judah whose descendant would become the Messiah. He believed in God's covenant promise to his great Grandfather Abraham that they would become a people and be given a land.

However, the promise did not end with Israel as a people and land in the Middle East it was redefined by Jesus as a new covenant for all people of faith from every nation and the land will be a new heaven and earth. So, in the visions of Revelation given to John on Patmos he is reminded that the descendants of Joseph form part of the people of God. *Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel. From the tribe of Joseph 12,000* Rev 7:4-8 Symbolic numbers of completeness and perfection of the people of God.

The road from Joseph to Jesus is one of faith in God, it leads to the Exodus from Egypt and the establishment of the twelve brothers' tribes in the land of Canaan under Moses and Joshua. It leads to the establishment of Judah as a tribe and of Jesus as his descendant. The coming of Jesus at Advent and his death and resurrection and ascension pioneered the road of faith that leads to a new heaven and new earth after death under the true prince and deliverer Jesus Christ.

Joseph was the Prince of Egypt for a time to save his people, Jesus is the prince of peace for eternity to save all from every nation who have faith in him. Advent reminds us of the coming of the prince of peace and we look forward to him coming again as King to reign over his kingdom and people on the new heaven and earth.

What a story. What a journey! Joseph reminded his brothers at the end of his life, *"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good what is now being done, the saving of many lives."* Genesis 50:20

What a story. What a journey! With Jesus the Prince of peace, the king of Kings.